

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS
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FILE ONLY

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Ronald Pelton Trial

BROKAW: Federal prosecutors say that this man, Ronald Pelton, offered the Soviet Union what they called a gold mine of sensitive information about America's national defenses. That was the dramatic description used today at the opening of Pelton's trial as a spy.

As NBC's James Polk reports tonight, the government offered tapes of Pelton's conversations with the Russians.

JAMES POLK: The prosecution said Ronald Pelton's betrayal began with a phone call to a Soviet Embassy official in 1980, a conversation the FBI wiretapped without knowing then who the caller was.

[Clip of telephone call]

POLK: The two men set up a meeting.

[Clip of telephone call]

POLK: For 14 years Pelton had worked inside the super-secret National Security Agency. His job, according to testimony, helping oversee the interception of scrambled and coded radio messages inside the Soviet Union.

Pelton would call again the next day.

[Clip of telephone call]

POLK: The Russian voice on the other end was that of Vitaly Yurchenko. Pelton would not be discovered until Yurchenko defected to the U.S. last year and informed on him.

In the meantime, prosecutors said, Pelton flew twice to Vienna, Austria, staying inside the Russian Embassy there, telling the KGB what he knew.

One of those operations, an NSA witness testified today, involved the interception of Russian command information at the highest levels of the Soviet Union. But most of the details of this case are still secret and are being withheld from the public, as well as the jury.

Pelton's trial comes after a series of damaging spy cases and may be the most serious yet.

Navy turncoat John Walker sold the Russians secret U.S. codes for almost 20 years.

Larry Wu-Tai Chin spied for Communist China inside the CIA for 30 years.

Jonathan Pollard was arrested for spying for Israel and may plead guilty soon.

The only defense Pelton's lawyer offered the jury today was that the FBI had tricked Pelton into confessing by failing to warn him of his right to silence. The judge already has ruled against the defense on that issue.

Pelton faces life in prison if convicted.